

# THE MEANINGS IN HISTORY

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Alban G. Widgery

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Volume 30

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ALBAN G. WIDGERY

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ALBAN G. WIDGERY

*London*

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RUSKIN HOUSE • MUSEUM STREET

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1967

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*To the Memory of*  
MARION  
*whose affection was the best thing*  
*in my history*



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## PREFACE

IN 1910 I was awarded the Burney Studentship at Cambridge University for studies relative to the nature of history. I have continued them all the years since. In 1961, in my *Interpretations of History: Confucius to Toynbee* I gave illustrations of various attitudes to and theories of history. I wanted something more widely useful than the several volumes that would be needed to cover the whole extent of my studies. That work was only incidentally critical.

From my interpretation of much of the work of Dr Arnold Toynbee, one reviewer got the impression that I am a Toynbeean. I certainly am not. As will be seen from this book, my methods are quite different from his. I am fundamentally opposed to many of his ideas. To make an adequate criticism of his work would require the writing of a volume. I am more interested in presenting my own view of history. He seems to me not to have given much philosophical reflection to the subject and conflicting types of philosophy underlie different parts of his first ten volumes. There are some philosophical references to the works of Bergson and Smuts. The section: 'The Quest for Meaning behind the Facts of History' (Vol. X, pp. 126-44) is entirely inadequate and extraordinarily weak. I find meanings *in* history, not *behind* it.

I have learned very much from what I have recorded in my *Interpretations of History*, but I do not give an account of it here. With it as background, through the years I have endeavoured to formulate my own ideas of history. This volume presents them.

I have tried to make my writing as simple and direct as possible. That has been difficult but I hope it makes for easy reading. There are many repetitions in the book. Like those in history they are in different contexts and serve to emphasize main ideas. The book is not what some people call 'profound'. I have not been impressed, but rather repelled, from what many have thought profound, most often unintelligible statements. Two illustrations of such may suffice: the late Samuel Alexander's 'time is the mind of space' and Dr Toynbee's as to breaking 'the bonds of time and space'.

Of the vast amount of literature, occidental and oriental, I

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have studied in a long life, nothing has influenced my thought and action more than a simple passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. After comments on Plato's attempt to arrive at a general idea of 'good', he wrote that the doctor has to deal with 'the health of a particular man: it is individuals he is healing'. While recognizing the place of concepts in thought I have concentrated my attention far more on the particulars of experience. That is evidenced in this book. It contains the substance of lectures on the Reynolds Foundation at Amherst College.

Alban G. Widgery

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

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#### I

'WHY study *history*?' That has often been asked. It is a reasonable question. Our activities are mostly directed to affairs of the present and preparations for the future. History concerns the past which we cannot change. In the educational systems of most countries children and adolescents are taught some history. The primary motive is probably to cultivate feelings and ideas of social solidarity with the people of their nation, to promote their acceptance of forms of social organization that have been developed in the past. In colleges and universities many students take history as a subject for their degrees as not requiring the skill of mathematics, the concentration of attention for the learning of languages, nor the hours in laboratories for efficiency in the natural sciences. They think, of course, erroneously, that for *history* all one needs is a good memory of the facts. Embarked on life after school or college, the very great majority make no further study of the *history* of the past and forget most they had previously learned. But they are interested in the history that is the living present: they listen for the news on the radio and television and their reading is of little else than newspapers and periodicals. I have heard it said that we could do with fewer historians; that there is scope for men as doctors, of which it is reported the United States needs at least 20,000 more. But it is a very interesting and significant fact of history that men have had an interest in past events and persons and have made records of them. Historians have played and play a part in the continuity of the life of mankind. They have had, and have, good reasons for the study of history.

It has been maintained that the chief purpose of the study of history is for its pragmatic value. It is supposed that from the

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successes and failures of people in the past we may learn something to guide our action in the present. There is little doubt that, for example, what the British learned from the American Revolution affected their colonial policies and made possible the present British Commonwealth of Nations. But the pragmatic value of *history* should not be over-estimated. The conditions of the present are in many respects vastly different from those of the past and call for ideas and forms of conduct differing from those of the past. Something may be learned from past mistakes of government but it is obvious that in many countries the conditions of the present require changes from types of government that were good in their own times and places. Good effects of the past are carried on more by customs and practical action than by the influence of historical records.

As we know from the histories of many peoples there has been, and is, a widespread liking for stories among mankind. Children seem to be fascinated by them; so many of them being introduced 'Once upon a time'. The vast amount of fiction that is produced indicates the great interest of adults in stories. Interest in history is partly from the liking of stories. But many persons when they see a cinema or television representation of something historical or read a historical novel are inclined to ask 'What of it is true?' The study of history is thus not merely from the fascination of stories but also from an interest in truth. In this we find the main reason for the study of history. It is one aspect of man's intellectual activity, an expression of his thirst for knowledge. There is some intellectual interest in the past history of any and every people. Even if knowledge about them in the present is more important, some knowledge of their past may help in understanding them in the present.

It has been contended that the study of history has ethical import. By it we may trace the course of mankind with reference to the moral or immoral conduct of individuals, singly and in groups. Moral values, principles and qualities of character of persons, may be the same whatever the conditions of time and place—for the present and the future as well as for the past. There have been, and are, diversities in the specific modes of conduct, 'rules', which are relative to the different circumstances in which moral values are sought. It may be—and I believe is—

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possible to find a continuity of the fundamentals of morality throughout the course of history. Those who have denied this have not probed to fundamentals but simply observed diverse forms of conduct by which in varied circumstances men have tried to realize them. Formerly there was much discussion whether the professional historian should pass moral judgments on the conduct of those of the past of whom he writes. I think that as *historian* he should not. But he should attend, as facts of history, to the moral judgments made or implied by those of whom he writes. The intelligent who reflect on history do make moral judgments with reference to it. The professional historian, in his personal reaction to the data he considers may, and probably generally does, make such judgments. But it cannot be said that his—or any individuals' ethical judgments are an affair of historical knowledge.

The study of history expands the conscious life of the individual, saving him in no small measure from narrow concern with his immediate surroundings, making him aware of the relations of his own history with the histories of individuals of the past. By the study of history men's vision may become increased both in breadth and in details; their moral sympathies widened and intensified; their aesthetic enjoyment enriched; and their appreciation of religion deepened. Another reason for the study of history is the desire to see if one can find in it anything that may help the individual to understand the nature of history, help him to find meanings in it, help him in his reflection on his own personal history. Though relatively few may consider history in this manner, such reflection on it should be of general concern. Sharing the other motives for the study of history, this is for me predominant. One main purpose of my writing this book is to arouse attention to it in others.

## II

The word 'history' is used in two ways. It may refer (1) to actual history, the experiences of human beings, internally and in their relations to others in social events in the environment of the physical world, and possibly, as some maintain, in communion with God; and (2) to the investigations and records of these in



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the works of annalists, journalists and professional historians. The present volume is considered primarily and fundamentally with the former. For the latter I use the term italicized: *history*.

Professional historians who do not restrict themselves entirely to some region and period may know something of the history of *history*. Most persons know little of it. Primitive men probably have had little if anything of history. Their thoughts were not of the past but of what they must do to supply the needs of the immediate future. With more organized communities there may have been oral 'tales', partly historical, of happenings in the recent past.

The idea of oscillation was applied to history, as by some individual Greeks, some Stoics and the Pythagoreans, according to whom each new world exactly represents the preceding one. According to the Etruscans each successive race in history has its 'Great Year' in which it sprouts, flourishes, decays and dies. The idea may have been suggested to human minds early by the natural phenomena of spring, summer, autumn, winter and the sequence in vegetation in those recurring seasons, and by birth, youth, old age and death. Later there came ideas of different recurring ages in history, as in Greek mythology, the Golden, the Silvern, the Brazen and the Iron, with the Heroic sometimes placed between the third and the fourth. Shakespeare talked of the seven ages of man: infancy, boyhood, adolescence, manhood, age and old age. History is often divided into ages: ancient, dark, middle and modern, but with different views as to where the divisions should rightly come.

The beginnings of recorded *history* were probably of the acts and families of royal personages, and then of wars. That type of *history* seems to have dominated for very many centuries, even in part into our own times. It was the sort of *history* I was taught in school at the end of the last century, even though J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People* had been published in 1874 and had gone through very many editions and reprints. Writing at that time he said: 'It is a reproach of historians that they have too often turned *history* into a mere record of the butchery of men by their fellowmen.' Even Green's book had more about military conflicts and royal personages than I expected to find in it. Despite his own aims he

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was influenced too much by earlier historians and his poor health limited him in the arduous task of learning the facts of 'ordinary' people. Since his time, *history* has advanced in many ways, but in my opinion, in none so much as in the recording of particular currents, as the intellectual, the aesthetic and the political. It is specifically in this regard that it is significant for the view of history here presented. I would mention a comment Green made on the basis of some early studies. They had taught him 'what few historians know—the intimate part religion plays in a nation's history, and how closely it joins itself to a people's life'. Of the many who have influenced me in the development of my conception of history I am inclined to place the French philosopher, Charles Renouvier first. For some aspects of it I know I am indebted to Aristotle, Leibnitz and Carlyle.

An individual's acquaintance with actual history is only within his own experience. For his ideas of all else he is dependent mostly on what is included in recorded *history*. The greater part of what he thinks of as history he learns from others. More often than not he accepts it because of its consistency with his own experience. His acceptance of what goes beyond that experience is on his trust in others. On the authority of others he judges more qualified to know than himself, he may admit the possibility of the truth of statements apparently in contradiction with his own experience. Nevertheless, in reflection on the nature of history and of any meanings in it, the individual's own experience should be a main consideration and never forgotten. The failure to pay attention to this appears to me to account for the unsatisfactory character of so much that has been written on history.

The individual's ideas are so socially conditioned that in reflection on history he may, and most often does, fail to give regard to himself and his own history. Part of this conditioning is in the works of professional historians. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the character of the writings of professional historians. They give their attention to (1) biographies; (2) studies of particular currents of history, economic, political, military, aesthetic (the fine arts), scientific, philosophical and religious. Even biographies are more often concerned with the subject's relations with his fellow men than with the significance

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of history as it has been for the subject himself. Autobiographies are often written in similar fashion. Inevitably the attention of the professional historian is directed to the social because he strives to interest many persons. Yet the effect of the conditioning by the writings of historians is to turn the attention of the individual to what is in many respects external to himself, however much it comes within the scope of his own vision.

In the late nineteenth century there were some historians who maintained that the nature of history is such that it can and should be studied with the methods that have been so successful in the sciences of the physical world. There may be some still who work from the standpoint of that view even if they do not explicitly avow it. Scientific history was to be not merely an accurate description of the data, but the elucidation of uniformities of causes and effects in its processes. There was talk of 'laws of history' analogous with those of the physical world. It may be questioned whether any 'laws *of* history' have been discovered. There are 'laws *in* history' for it occurs with the uniformities of the physical world and human minds. In investigation in the sciences of the physical world there may be experiments with precise repetition of processes in the search for verification of hypotheses. No such methods of experimentation are possible in the study of history. There are some forms of repetition in history but the historian is not so much concerned with them as such as he is with sequences of events constituting patterns or systems, the various elements of which are to some extent parts of rational wholes. The intelligibility of historical processes is found primarily not in uniformities and repetitions but in forms of co-ordination for the attainment of one or more particular ends. Most historians have abandoned the futile effort to pursue the study of history with the methods of the natural sciences. Some sociologists have fallen into the error of wanting to regard sociology as primarily concerned with the search for uniformities that may be statistically formulated. In so doing they are suggesting a quite inadequate standpoint for the understanding of the social in history. Scientific method in history amounts to little more than extreme care and objectivity in the collection and presentation of the data and logical reasoning in the inferences from them.

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The task of the historian is more difficult than that of the natural scientist. Though like the latter he has to observe any uniform processes, he has also to give full attention to contingencies, with reference to when and where they occurred. The continuities with which the historian is concerned are not repetitions of processes but sequences of significance in the succession of different events. The unity he seeks is not that of subsuming particulars under a general concept but of the relations of different factors in a more or less systematic pattern. The historian may affirm some probabilities as to future history with consideration of the conscious efforts of individuals, singly or in groups, for the attainment of similar value-experiences. It has been said that we know very little of history, and that of relatively small sections of mankind. To me, it seems much more than I would have expected it to be. I do not know if there is discovery of much 'new' source material. Much historical writing is a reconsideration of previous *histories*.

The historians who proposed the above-mentioned view of 'scientific' history turned from any philosophical or religious interpretations of history. Their attitude in this regard has been adopted by many historians from their time to our own. 'Philosophies of history' are for many of them their *bêtes noires*. In their pursuits as historians they may disclaim any efforts at interpretation. Beyond the investigation of facts historians *may* engage in the problems of interpretation. Further, it should be recognized that even in their professional tasks they cannot escape from all philosophical implications. They must make selections of the facts about which to write and have ideas as to what they will regard as facts. They have underlying attitudes and conceptions about which, with their rejection of philosophizing, they do not reflect. Two illustrations must suffice to show what I mean here.

In the book of *Joshua* in the Bible (x 13), it is stated that 'the sun stood still and the moon stayed'. If a historian does not accept this as a fact, it is probably because he is regarding history with ideas as to what can or cannot, what does or does not, actually occur in it. If he accepts it as a fact he does so on the basis of other ideas. Many religious-minded persons have considered the statement as true—and some may still do so. They have regarded

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the event as being due to an act of God, so that 'the people avenged themselves of their enemies'. A question is involved: 'What part does God—if there is a God—play in human history?' This 'alleged' act may be just one example of His concern with and participation in it. If he rules such out, or does not admit such, a historian is committing himself to some kind of philosophical view, even though he does not explicitly avow or reflect on it. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada it was said in England: 'God blew with His winds and they were scattered.' Though this, apparently, does not suggest the same kind of interruption of natural processes as the former example, it does imply a belief in God's influence in actual history. Decision between different forms of interpretation cannot be simply by historical record of supposed actual events.

Historians make their selections upon which to write, and with good reasons. Yet in trying to understand the nature of history it has always to be borne in mind that history includes the experiences of some mediaeval thief (name unknown) as of St Thomas Aquinas, of each and every prostitute as of Florence Nightingale, of each and every Indian 'untouchable' as of the Romanoffs, of Gypsy Rose Lee as well as of Sir Winston Churchill. In their selections for political, intellectual, ethical or other reasons, historians have emotional and intellectual attitudes. Those *may* reflect what are dominant among the people of their own times and countries. For this reason history needs to be re-written for each age. Nevertheless, that historians occupy themselves so much with periods other than their own should make them less subject to passing fashions of contemporary thought than non-historians are likely to be. Even so, no historian can be completely impartial however much he aspires to be, and this affects the selection of facts about which he writes.

## III

For very many centuries the only general ideas as to history were those associated with religion. It may be said, with little fear of inaccuracy, that even today the most widespread are those of the great living religions. It is extremely interesting that all these religions have reference to alleged facts of history. Even though

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we may be convinced that the vitality and continuity of the religions have not depended, and do not depend, on the truth of the claims as to historical facts, the consideration of history requires some recognition of them.

Hinduism developed with reference to the *rishis*, who early in history revealed the sacred *Vedas*. One Hindu scholar told me that the task of Hindu thinkers is not to try independently to think of the problems of life and existence but to interpret the *Vedas* as authoritative with regard to them. The Hindu stories of divine incarnations in human history, though treated by scholars as myths, have an implication of a belief in divine concern in human history. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the importance of which for Hindus cannot be exaggerated, the Lord says: 'To guard the righteous, to destroy evil doers, to establish the Law, I come into birth age after age.' The idea of Krishna, as an incarnation of Vishnu, has played, and plays, a distinctive part in the emotional aspects of Hindu religious life. There are numerous temples with his image and he has been one of the most favourite subjects of Hindu paintings. In Madras I saw a Hindu youth drop a coconut and make his reverential bow before an image of Ganesha, the elephant-headed incarnation, a sort of patron of learning and wisdom. He told me he did it because he had passed his entrance examination to the university. Fundamentally, for Hindus history consists of the series of lives in and through which, usually as stage by stage, *moksha* or bliss is to be attained. History is a set of processes through which individuals are to attain to spiritual perfection. But the leading thinkers of Hindu history have not given their attention much to alleged historical facts: they have concentrated it on fundamental ideas of existence and experience of the divine.

For Buddhism also history is a realm in which individuals are to strive for redemption and to attain the ultimate state of *nirvana*. But even Buddhism developed with reference to alleged historical events. This is indicated by its name from that of its founder, Gautama, the Buddha. He came to be regarded as something like a Hindu 'incarnation', who came to bring the saving knowledge to mankind. He was included as one of the three 'jewels' in which faith was professed: 'I take my refuge in the Buddha; I take my refuge in the Dhamma (doctrine); I take

my refuge in the Sangha (the community, presumably of monks and nuns).’ In the course of time the Dhamma was formulated in an authoritative canon that has continued to be accepted throughout Buddhist history. The veneration of the Buddha is evidenced by the great number of images of him in Buddhist countries. It is supposed that after the Buddha, the spiritual salvation of men has been promoted by Bodhisattvas, saviours, who have come into history. In the histories of Buddhist peoples only secondary recognition has been given to those who contributed markedly to welfare in a secular manner.

Judaism has been and is definitely associated with alleged historical events. In their scriptures, included in what most of us know as the *Old Testament*, the fortunes and misfortunes of the Jewish community and of particular individuals are portrayed as having been dependent on the nature of their relations with God. Specific significance is given to certain events. The Lord said to Abraham: ‘I will make of thee a great nation . . . and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’ (*Genesis* xii 2,3.) In *Deuteronomy* (vii 6) it is declared that ‘God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself. . . .’ The Lord ‘descended on Mount Sinai in fire’ (*Exodus* xix 18) and ‘the Lord delivered unto me (Moses) two tables of stone written with the finger of God’ (*Deuteronomy* ix 10). On these were the ten commandments in accordance with which men should live their history. The implication is clear: that however varied rules may be in different times and places, morality is not simply a social convention. Its character is prescribed by God. From the requirement of keeping ‘the Sabbath holy’ and in numerous other indications, it is evident that men are to worship God. In later centuries, probably in part through the promise that they should be a ‘great nation’ and were a ‘chosen people’, the idea was developed that a saviour, the Messiah, would come to re-establish their nation after their crushing subjugation. The principles of the Jewish faith formulated by Maimonides (1135–1204), widely accepted since his time by orthodox Jews, contain the statement: ‘The Messiah, should he tarry, will surely come.’ I do not know to what extent the belief in a coming Messiah is still held among Jews. History for the Jews should be considered from the standpoint of the ‘Law of God’ supposed to have been historically revealed.